



would not admire): it is grace from God, and nothing in human beings themselves, that gives hope to see God.

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## WOMEN FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD

MIDDLETON (G.D.) *Women in the Ancient Mediterranean World. From the Palaeolithic to the Byzantines*. Pp. xx + 294, ills. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Paper, £22.99, US\$29.99 (Cased, £75, US\$100). ISBN: 978-1-108-70383-3 (978-1-108-48113-7 hbk).  
 doi:10.1017/S0009840X23002184

‘This book has been written in the first place for her . . . and for her little sister too’ (p. xi). This is how M. explains what motivated him to publish this collection of biographies of women who inhabited different regions of the Mediterranean from the Palaeolithic to Byzantine times: to provide his daughters with historical accounts to serve as points of reference, so that they can imagine a past with women who worked, ruled, cared and created community.

The book opens with setting the scene of the ancient Mediterranean context and an introductory chapter that addresses the traditional omission of women in historiographical discourse, along with issues such as the exposure and infanticide of girls and the applicability of the concepts of patriarchy and matriarchy to ancient societies. In its concise format it serves to explain why the work is relevant and why history should be looked at from a gendered point of view.

The book then presents brief biographies of around 30 historical women distributed over 30 chapters, which have been divided according to chronological criteria into five parts. Part 1, ‘The Deep Past’, looks at the life of Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer women, skeleton F.8018 from the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük and skeleton 1268 from the Maltese village of Gozo. Part 2, ‘The Bronze Age’, is divided into eight chapters devoted to Merneith, Simatum and Kirum, two anonymous women from La Almoloya, Anemospilia, Hatshepsut, Puduhepa, Eritha and Karpathia, and Hatiba. Part 3, ‘The Iron Age’, contains another eight chapters. These cover the biographies of Naunakhte, Herse, Pkpupes, Atossa, the princess of Vix, Aristonice, Neaira and Phanistrate. Part 4, ‘The Hellenistic Worlds’, traces the biographies of Olympias, Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa, Terentia and Mariamne. Finally, Part 5, ‘The Age of the Empire’, takes us to the Roman Empire to show us the lives of Cleopatra Selene, Eutychis, Achillia and Amazon, Perpetua, Zenobia, Hypatia and Theodora.

The book’s back cover promises to offer ‘new insights for students and researchers in Ancient History, Archaeology and Mediterranean Studies, as well as in Women’s History’, an objective that the publication does not fulfil: in terms of historiography the book does not offer innovative readings, nor does it include ideas that have not already been studied in depth, although I do not believe that it was M.’s intention to provide those. The historical data provided about the women are already accessible in the works listed in the bibliography given in the book, a bibliography that distances itself from the

'Mediterranean spirit' of the work by including publications almost exclusively in English. Some of the women, such as Terentia and Perpetua, have already been studied from multiple points of view, although it is appreciated that M. has avoided chapters on the well-researched Nefertiti, Cornelia and Livia, and has given space to other lesser-known women such as Kirum and Phanostrate. Short as they are, the chapters do not allow for too much insight into the lives of the women, in some cases obviously due to the lack of explicit sources on them; so readers are often left with the feeling of wanting to know more. M. offers an extensive and up-to-date bibliographical selection in the notes and at the end of the book to enable readers to delve deeper into the lives of these women as well as the cultures in which they lived, but one wonders whether historians, archaeologists or Classicists will get much more out of it than a list of references to consult.

From an academic point of view, the most relevant aspect of the book is to be found in the historiographical exercise carried out by M. to bring together written, iconographic and material sources, in such a way as to offer a much more complete picture of the women and their cultures. In this sense, perhaps, it would have been more interesting to deal exclusively with prehistoric chronologies, which are less researched from the point of view of biography than the classical period, and to see how far the 'fictional life stories' – which M. already employs with mastery, especially in the initial sections – can be used as a methodology to approach the individual lives of past women. It is in chapters such as those on the Gozo woman and on Eritha and Karpathia that M.'s ability to offer historically plausible glimpses into the lives of women for whom we have 'only' their skeletal remains or fragments of written texts, in combination with the information we have about the societies in which they lived, is reflected.

Having said that, taken as a whole, the volume is a nice book to offer non-specialists a first insight into the biographies of various women who populated the Mediterranean in the past. The chapters are well executed and very readable, and M. has managed to develop a scholarly discourse that avoids jargon. In addition, M. takes care to offer a varied collection in terms of geographical location and social position, so that we not only find chapters dedicated to queens, princesses or women of the Roman imperial families, but we also acquire a much broader view of what antiquity and the women who inhabited it were like. However, as a book for the general public, it lacks images – there is only one per chapter – to help readers understand the culture being described. The timeline (pp. xvi–xvii), where the women included in the book are listed in chronological order, with their names (if known) and modern geographical location, should be revised, as Theodora is missing.

The real strength of the book is to present various historiographical debates of recent decades about women and gender in a simplified way. In this sense, M. moves away from the traditional biography of historical dissemination and addresses questions such as what patriarchy is and when it arose, how historians have analysed the past from an androcentric point of view and what gender is in historical perspective.

This is a highly recommendable book for history lovers who want to learn about past women in all their diversity and a good support guide for pre-university teachers. Those of us who work on gender history know how important it is to build historical genealogies, to name women of the past, whether rulers, priestesses, shepherds or poets, so that today's women feel that they are also part of the historical narrative, which until recently was dominated by men. And that is precisely what this book does.

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